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ENGLISH POETRY AND GERMAN  
PHILOSOPHY IN THE AGE OF  
WORDSWORTH

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A. C. BRADLEY

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*English Poetry and German  
Philosophy in the Age of  
Wordsworth*

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BY


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## English Poetry and German Philosophy in the Age of Wordsworth.

Professor Adamson devoted to philosophy the main work of his life. His teaching, in Manchester, in Aberdeen, in Glasgow, is remembered by hundreds of grateful pupils; and his writings, like the lectures which have been reproduced with conspicuous fidelity and skill since his death, are valued by all students of philosophy,—so highly valued as constantly to renew their regret that he did not live to pursue still further, and to record with his own hand, the ideas to which he had been led by many years of questioning and meditation. But by his friends the philosopher was admired also for a knowledge, judgment, and enjoyment of literature which professed students of that subject might envy, and by which some of them often profited; for no man could be more generous and helpful than Adamson, and he delighted in communicating knowledge as much as in acquiring it. When I was honoured with an invitation to give this lecture, I remembered these things; and it seemed to me appropriate that my subject should have something to do with philosophy, though it must belong mainly to the field of literature, and, where it extends into the other sphere, must be treated in a manner as little technical as possible, or, perhaps I should say, with the superficiality proper to a man of letters.

The present year is one of centenaries; and its immediate successors will resemble it. Darwin, Tennyson, Gladstone, and Lincoln, to name only the greatest, were quickly followed by Dickens, Thackeray, and Browning, by Bismarck, Schumann, and Wagner. Something like this conglomeration of new stars, this sudden pouring of a flood of genius on the earth, has been witnessed at other times. It is impossible to

exaggerate its importance. Of its causes we know absolutely nothing, but it itself is the primary cause of the greatness of great periods, and without it nothing wonderful would come of 'environment' or the spirit of the time. Another example of it, certainly not less remarkable, occurred in the later Eighteenth Century. In 1769 were born Napoleon and Wellington; next year Hegel and Wordsworth, and a greater still, Beethoven; then Scott, then Coleridge; and in 1775 and 1776 the philosophers Schelling and Herbart. After that there was a pause in the production, not indeed of remarkable men, but of men so pre-eminently endowed; but in 1788 there appeared together, by a curiously happy conjunction, Byron and Schopenhauer; and a few years later Shelley, and then Keats. By reason, in the first instance, of one of these births Europe was convulsed with war for nearly two decades. By reason of others, though not of course for that reason alone, Europe saw a magnificent outburst of imaginative literature in England and of philosophy in Germany. Account for the poets and philosophers we cannot in the least; but we can observe a certain community of spirit among them, certain differences between one and another, certain influences which operated on them in various ways. That is an immense subject, and I confine myself to some remarks on the coincidence of this poetry and philosophy, on that community of spirit in them, and on some particular affinities between Wordsworth and Hegel, who happened, as we say, to be born in the same year. By the phrase 'The Age of Wordsworth,' it should be added, is meant the last few years of the Eighteenth Century and the first quarter of the Nineteenth.

### I.

Our first topic may be introduced by an imaginary question put to me: 'Since you speak of English poetry and not of German (though the Germans had a

great poetry as well as we), why speak of German philosophy and not of English?' First, I reply, because the English philosophy of the time seems to me to have much less community than the German with our poetry; and next because a comparison of our poetry with our philosophy would be a comparison of something of the first rank with something of the second rank at best. For it is a striking peculiarity of our literature in the Age of Wordsworth (as may be seen by reference to Professor Herford's admirable little book on that period) that, while it was exceptionally strong on the imaginative side, it was by no means so in other directions. It was the time of the poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats; of the novelists Scott and Jane Austen; of the poetic critics Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Lamb. Here, in imaginative literature, are eight writers who by almost universal consent are ranked, in point at least of genius, only below—and not in every case below—the very greatest in their field of work. But when we turn to other kinds of literature we find nothing like this. We find valuable writing on philosophy, theology, history, politics; but (except perhaps in the very special field of political economy) not a single writer who occupies in his department the rank that these eight hold in theirs, or such a rank as would be assigned without doubt to some writers of the Eighteenth Century,—to Hume in philosophy, to Gibbon in history, and to Burke in political disquisition. Whatever the substantial value of Hume's philosophy may be, no one will question his *genius* for the subject or his claim to a considerable place in its history. But it would be something more than rash to say this of Godwin or Dugald Stewart or Bentham. If any Englishman of that time had a gift for philosophy amounting to genius, it was Coleridge. But, even if his gift was really so great, he was unable to use it in such a way as to influence the development of the science, and if we wish to know what he tried in vain

to accomplish we must go to his contemporaries in Germany. For there we find just what we miss at home, an effluence of philosophical genius as unmistakable and almost as profuse as the effluence of imagination here. There is plenty of room for dispute about the truth of the theories of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, but not for dispute about their genius. *Their* names may be coupled without any sense of incongruity with those of our eight imaginative writers, and in many of their thoughts we feel the presence of the same spirit that spoke in English poetry. The statement that Wordsworth and Hegel, or Byron and Schopenhauer, express one substance in different forms would be a misleading exaggeration, but not a paradox. But who could dream of saying such a thing of Wordsworth and Byron on the one side and of our native philosophers on the other?

This very marked discrepancy between the two kinds of literature is a peculiarity of the Age of Wordsworth. We do not find it in the same degree at any other period after the Revival of Letters. We do not find it at all in the times of Locke and Berkeley and Hume. And yet, as it appears to me and as I will try to show, it illustrates in an extreme form a characteristic of the English or Anglo-Saxon mind.

Suppose there were a congress of all the peoples that are and have been. And suppose the judges had to determine the special gift or gifts—the genius, so to say—of each people, and so its particular contributions to humanity. What would they say to us English? They would not compare us with the Greeks in sculpture, or the Germans in music, or (though we have had great painters) with the Italians in painting. But might they not say to us something like this? ‘You have shown an unsurpassed, perhaps an unequalled, genius for politics and government, and not less for business. These belong to the field of practice. Passing beyond it, you have done great things in the

sciences of nature, and—strange in a nation of shopkeepers!—such great things in imaginative literature, and especially in poetry, that it is possible here to compare the English, alone of modern peoples, with the Greeks. Your constitution and empire, your manufactures and commerce, your Newton, your Shakespeare—no one will deny you first prizes for these exhibits.'

Now let me continue, to save the judges a disagreeable duty and to bring out the point I have in view. I will put it broadly and without the qualifications which, no doubt, should be supplied. Our poetry, which for the present purpose may be taken to include our imaginative literature in general, is one of our national glories. And it is in poetry that the English mind expresses most fully its deepest insight and feelings. This cannot be done by natural science, simply because that confines itself to a single aspect of the world. It may be done by religion, by philosophy, by poetry and the other arts, because they are not thus confined. The English mind does it best in poetry, and not in the shape of religious or philosophical ideas. We have been, and are, much in earnest about religion; but we have produced very few, if any, men of the first order of genius in that sphere—men like St. Francis, Thomas à Kempis, Luther, or Pascal, mystics like Jacob Böhme, theologians like Schleiermacher. In philosophy we have some great names, but none of the greatest, none to rank with Plato or Aristotle, Spinoza or Kant. And then there is this further fact. When the English mind is in flood and approaching or reaching its high-tide, or (to vary the metaphor) when its spiritual temperature is highest, it breaks into poetry; and its greatest poetry appears at such times. But its most famous philosophy does not. Locke and Berkeley and Hume appear when the tide is on the ebb, or the temperature a trifle sub-normal, and when the poetry shows less of creative power and lyrical passion and comes somewhat nearer to prose. Is not that symptomatic? And this is not

all. The matter, the ideas, of these philosophers do not strike us as corresponding with those pictures of the world that are painted by our most imaginative poets. More than a certain degree of such correspondence we cannot, of course, expect. Philosophy never speaks the same language as poetry, or presents exactly the same view of things. If it did, why should it exist? But still, if we read first Pindar and the Greek dramatists, and then Plato and Aristotle, we feel no incongruity or want of kinship in the poetry and the philosophy, and no inadequacy of either to the other. Neither do we feel this after reading German poetry from Goethe to Heine, and German philosophy from Kant to Hegel (a statement which does not imply that any of the philosophers was so wonderful a man as Goethe). But this is just what we do feel when we pass from the poetry of Shakespeare's or Wordsworth's Age to Locke or Hume or any of our most purely native philosophers. We find ourselves in the presence, not merely of an inferior degree of genius, but of a view of the world incongruous with the substance of the poetry.

Well, these facts may be interpreted in opposite ways. They arise, you may tell me, from that massive common-sense in which we are so superior to the volatile Greeks and the dreamy Germans. We have, indeed, an odd liking for poetry; but we know that it is really made of moon-shine, and that a true philosophy must show it to be so, and must be merely empirical or sceptical. And I shall reply, of course, that your contention is itself an illustration of my thesis that the English mind, on the whole, sees deepest when it sees poetically, and that it welcomes and is inspired by that which its poets tell it, but shakes its head and turns away when philosophers, Greek or German or educated by Greeks and Germans, offer to its understanding what its imagination had accepted. But whichever interpretation of the fact is correct—whether our poetry is inadequate to our philosophy, or our philosophy to our

poetry—their incongruity surely is a fact; and it is illustrated in a striking degree in Wordsworth's time, when our poetry shows but little kinship with our own philosophy, and a good deal with that of Germany.

## II.

I come to my second subject. Everyone who reads the literature of the two countries at that time (I am using the word 'literature' as inclusive of philosophy) feels the presence of one atmosphere and spirit in all that he reads. Yet when he examines and reflects, he finds a number of divergent and even violently conflicting tendencies. Let me give two examples of this divergence. There is the strain of the *Aufklärung*, as the Germans call it—the 'enlightenment'—the rationalistic strain, which comes down from Locke and the English Deists, and from Voltaire and the Encyclopædists, with its rejection of supernaturalism and of all external authority, and its belief in reason and in the goodness and progress of man. It is exemplified in our poetry by Shelley, though there is much in Shelley that transcends it. But over against this we find an implicit or open rejection of the claims of this reason, an insistence on feeling, on the affections, on imagination, or some higher kind of reason; again, an unusual sympathy with Nature, amounting sometimes to worship, and coupled with hostility to that mechanical interpretation of Nature which is held to be rational; and, further, a similar appreciation of human nature where it is *not* particularly rational or progressive—for instance, in children, peasants, or simple women who 'do not understand, but love.' There is much of this, we know, in Wordsworth and Coleridge and even in Byron. So there is also in the successors of Kant. They are, no doubt, believers in what *they* call reason, and in no merely external authority; but they oppose the *Aufklärung* and pour scorn on the pretensions of *its* reason.

This is one main contrast which runs through the literature. Here is another. That enthusiastic faith in man's progress towards perfect goodness and happiness belongs mainly to the strain of the *Aufklärung*, and we are familiar with it in Shelley; but where the contrary strain prevails, as in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and some of the philosophers, we still find a very decided optimism,—a conviction, to quote Wordsworth, that

the inner frame is good  
And graciously composed.

On the other hand, Shelley's poetry, with all its enthusiasm, is profoundly melancholy; opposite Wordsworth stands Byron, weeping and laughing by turns over the tragedy or farce of life; and the optimist Hegel is confronted by Schopenhauer, the first exponent in the history of philosophy of a developed system of pessimism.

These contrasts may surprise and perplex us. But why should they? Only because we have so strong an impression of kinship and unity in the more remarkable products of the age, and because this impression persists, however clearly we may realise the contrasts. To what then is it due? I can refer, in answer, only to one or two essential points.

In almost all these products, poetic or philosophic, we feel an extraordinary intensity. The time is pre-eminently, to recur to our metaphors, one of a flood-tide or a high temperature. Each of the poets and philosophers seems to have caught sight of something that startles and engrosses him. He is staring at it with all his eyes and all his soul. And it fills him with thoughts and emotions which force him to utterance and creation. It makes no difference what particular aspect of things has thus arrested him; whether the emotions it excites are mainly joyful or painful; whether his mental life is tumultuous, as with Byron or Shelley or Schelling, or an inward and steady fire, as with Wordsworth and



Hegel. Still there is the same intent gaze, the same incessant and rapid creation, and the same stamp of inspiration on the product. Poetry ran in a torrent in those years, and in the history of philosophy there is nothing comparable to the speed with which Fichte, then Schelling, then Hegel, took the lead on the way opened by Kant. In view of this characteristic of the time, we must find it significant that so large a part of the most notable literature was the work of youth and early middle life. Keats, you will remember, died at twenty-five, Shelley at twenty-nine, Byron at thirty-six. The poetry by which Coleridge is remembered was almost all composed before he was thirty, and three-quarters of Wordsworth's best before he was forty. It had taken Kant five-and-fifty years to climb to the point of view of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; but Fichte and Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer, reached the main ideas which won them their places in history a little before or a little after their thirtieth year. If it were our business to estimate the value of these movements in poetry and philosophy, we should find that their greatness and their defects are both connected with this character of intensity and inspiration.

What then does it betoken? An unusually strong sense, I would answer, of the power and the possibilities of man or of the mind. This may seem a strange statement when we remember how conflicting are the tendencies of the age, and especially that it is the time of Byron and Schopenhauer. But man is himself full of variety and contradiction; and therefore the greatness of man, and a sense or conviction of it, may well appear in forms that conflict. So here, the ideas of the *Aufklärung* as to the power of the individual reason and will, and as to the future of mankind, as we find them, for example, in Shelley, imply an exceedingly strong sense of greatness in man as Shelley sees him, or, if we prefer it, in a particular aspect of man. But the poets and philosophers who reject this point of view or

greatly modify it, do not deny man's greatness; they assert it as *they* conceive it, and believe in *other* aspects of man, as strongly as Shelley himself. Again, the melancholy or the satiric spirit of some of the poetry, and the appearance of pessimistic philosophy, can not of course be directly due to a conviction of man's greatness; but none the less they witness to a peculiarly strong feeling of it. If I really feel myself a worm, I shall not be much saddened or exasperated when I miss the happiness of an angel: but I may be so if I feel myself only a little lower than the angels. All melancholy, despair, or rage, that has greatness in it, is an inverted idealism; and Byron and Schopenhauer only express negatively that sense of man's possibilities which is positively expressed by Shelley's prophetic rapture, Wordsworth's joy and faith, and the towering claims advanced by the philosophers for the mind of man.<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy indeed to illustrate this matter by quotations from Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel; but quotations containing terms which may be unfamiliar and cannot be quickly explained, are apt to mislead. These philosophers make statements about man, or 'the Ego,' or the mind, which at first astound the reader. He applies them to himself and the thousands around him as they walk and talk in their whole empirical bulk, if the phrase may be excused; and naturally the statements sound to him almost insane. Naturally, too, he is surprised and bewildered when, reading further, he finds these same philosophers saying of man, thus understood, things almost as painful or bitter as any to be found in *Ecclesiastes* or in Schopenhauer. But man, we know, is

The glory, jest, and riddle of the world;  
and it is of man as the glory of the world, and the answer

1. With regard to Schopenhauer it should be observed, also, that he won no fame in the age of which I am speaking. He came into his kingdom long after, when Hegel had been dethroned.

to its riddle, that those startling assertions are made. Even so, however, they remain startling. 'By virtue of man's mind,' writes Fichte, 'the bodies of the universe hold together and make *one* body, and the suns wheel in the paths assigned them. Through *it* stands fast the enormous graduated array of beings from the midge to the seraph, and in *it* is the system of the whole world of spirits.'<sup>1</sup> This dithyrambic style would not have suited Hegel in his later years; but to the end of his life he continued to maintain that it is not possible for man to think highly enough of the mind within him; that the hidden essence of the universe is powerless to resist the might of knowledge; that it is not humility but blasphemy to say that he cannot know God. And the favourite accusation of theologians against Hegel—an accusation ridiculous in one sense, but in another not wholly so—is that he identified God and man.

'But,' some one may say, 'this glorification of man must be peculiar to these strange philosophers. In our poetry—though in poetry such flights may be excused—there is nothing like it; and the proper answer to it is the pessimist's equally exaggerated depreciation of man.' Well, let us see. Schopenhauer, for whom the existence of the world is a gigantic blunder, and man sunk in error, misery, and evil, still insists that there is salvation from them, and that it depends simply and solely on man. For that blind will, of which the world is the manifestation, becomes conscious in man. And there, pursuing at first—and indeed, in most men, to the last—what it calls happiness, it learns in some men by hard experience, and in a few by hard thinking too, that happiness is an empty dream; and, turning against itself in the self-mortification of the Indian or Christian saint or the nineteenth century philosopher, it can deny itself and will itself away, and so return to

1. *Ueber die Würde des Menschen* (*Werke*, i. 413). I have paraphrased in order to avoid technical terms.

that Nirvana from which it made the monstrous mistake of issuing. It can do this if it will, but only in man. In other words, man can do this if he will; and on man, therefore, depends salvation from evil. This pessimistic philosophy thus exalts him almost as much as the optimistic. And as for English poetry, I will not quote from Shelley, since he may be expected to ascribe wonders to the mind of man, but from the poet whose religion was an offence to Shelley and who is known as the lover of humble lives and the preacher of humility. In the Preface to the *Excursion* Wordsworth printed some lines intended to introduce that philosophic poem, that song of Truth, of which the *Excursion* was to form a part. In these lines, after quoting Milton's prayer to the Heavenly Muse, he proceeds:—

Urania, I shall need  
 Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such  
 Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven !  
 For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink  
 Deep—and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds  
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.  
 All strength—all terror, single or in bands,  
 That ever was put forth in personal form—  
 Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir  
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones,  
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not  
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out  
 By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe  
 As fall upon us often when we look  
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—  
 My haunt, and the main region of my song.

In prose (for it is only the ideas that concern us here) : the heavens with their occupants, pictured by Milton, are but a veil to that temple which is the Mind of Man; and this Mind is a realm more awful than Milton's chaos

or hell; and, he goes on to say in lines which I have not quoted, it can also find in itself Milton's Garden of Eden and the Elysian Fields of the ancient poets. *All* is in it. Do you remember Fichte's words: 'in it is the system of the whole world of spirits'? Hegel, who knew most of the best poetry, seems unluckily never to have made acquaintance with Wordsworth's. He would have taken this passage to his heart.

### III.

That sense of the greatness of the mind which appears, directly or indirectly, in the most notable poetry and philosophy of the time, shows itself very strongly, we see, in these two writers. They resemble one another in further and more specific ways, some of which I proceed to notice, referring to Hegel only for the sake of them and without any idea of offering to expound his philosophy. From that point of view, indeed, many of the statements I shall have to make would be open to criticism.

The mind<sup>1</sup> in man instinctively expects to find its counterpart in the rest of the world. This expectation leads to many very inadequate ideas,—the ideas we class as anthropomorphic; but at bottom, in Hegel's view, it is justified. For the inmost principle in man's mind is also the inmost principle in everything else. Whatever exists is a partial manifestation of it; and it itself is mind, identical in essence with what we call our minds, though free from their limitations. It appears in two main forms, nature on the one side, 'our' minds, or finite mind, on the other; everywhere in both, from the elements of matter to the highest spiritual experience and creation; indivisibly in both, for mind is not composed of parts; more fully in the latter than in the

1. This word, and still more the adjective 'mental,' suggest to many readers something merely intellectual. I might guard against this misleading suggestion by using the words 'spirit' and 'spiritual,' and I have sometimes done so. But these terms also may mislead

former, but completely in neither.<sup>1</sup> Hence man's intelligence finds in nature, which may seem at first alien to it, its counterpart,—*e.g.*, mathematical relations, law, systematic order. For the same reason the poetic soul divines in nature a soul something like its own, petrified in the mountains, dreaming in the trees, waking to feeling in bird and beast, living and moving everywhere; and religion sees throughout the world, natural and human alike, the presence or operation of a divine being or beings. Philosophy has to correct, supplement, harmonise, these ideas of the scientific, or poetic, or religious mind, and to get into a shape that will satisfy reason the truths that they express or symbolise. What that shape was for Hegel is a question beyond us here. We must pause on the very general notion we have sketched.

Now let us turn to Wordsworth; and you must excuse me for spoiling his poetry in order to show the skeleton of ideas in it. No passage in his writings is more famous than that, in the *Lines written near Tintern Abbey*, where he speaks

Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky,

—in short, whose dwelling is in Nature: then he adds,

and in the mind of man;

and he goes on:

A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

This one spirit, he says, impels 'all thinking things,' *i.e.*, finite minds; and 'all objects of all thought,' *e.g.*, Nature; and rolls through, or is the unity of, both forms

1. Or, if completely in the latter, only so where the latter ceases to be finite.

of existence, minds and their objects. The same ideas recur, with slight differences of expression, in the discourse of the Wanderer in the *Excursion* (opening of Book ix.). There is a soul or active principle, he says, in everything: in stars, clouds, trees, rocks,—in short, in Nature; and, he adds, in 'the human mind;' which, he observes, is 'its most apparent home,' since there it appears without disguise, as soul. It is, however, the same soul in Nature and in Man; for, though it is distinct in every form of being, and a tree or rock is not a human mind, nor is each of them the other, yet none the less the spirit or active principle is one, continuous, and undivided in all:

from link to link

It circulates, the soul of all the worlds.

Further (I am now going beyond these two passages and condensing what may be gathered from many places), when the mind is poetic, as it is in thousands who are not poets, it *recognises* in Nature that one soul which is also in itself. It finds there life, feeling, joy, love. And in certain experiences also it receives from Nature, and from its own depths, intimations that this one soul, enclosing both Nature and itself, transcends both, is completely revealed in neither, is untouched by the change and decay and other defects of its partial and transitory manifestations, and beckons the mind away beyond Nature and its own finite or temporal existence.

The likeness of these ideas to Hegel's general position, as we faintly sketched it, is obvious.<sup>1</sup> If we went further

1. I do not mean that Wordsworth's ideas remind one of Hegel as distinguished from Schelling or even from Spinoza; and I may add the suggestion that the lines quoted from the *Tintern Abbey* poem probably owe something to Coleridge's conversations with Wordsworth about Spinoza in 1797. Coleridge knew nothing of Schelling then, and nothing of Hegel till much later. I imagine he helped to interpret Wordsworth's poetic experience to him in 1797, as afterwards he supplied him with some Kantian ideas. The later interruption, amounting for some years to a cessation, of their intercourse was a very great misfortune for Wordsworth, and may well have been partly responsible for his failure to advance.

we should find it accompanied by decided differences, on which I can only touch. For one thing, Hegel, though a great critic of poetry dealing with man, nowhere shows an unusual sensitiveness to natural beauty, and one may doubt whether he would fully have appreciated, as Schelling would, Wordsworth's poetry of Nature. Besides, he would have objected to any tendency to regard Nature as a revelation of the divine mind on a level with its revelation in man; and he might have attributed this tendency to Wordsworth, whether rightly or not we cannot stay to enquire. Again, Wordsworth's doctrine, if we may use the word, is that imagination is the way to truth. By imagination he does not mean mere fancy, but a transference of the mind into the centre of the thing contemplated, and a construing of all its motions or actions from that centre outwards. Hegel would have insisted that no interpretation that is drenched with the colours of imagination can be the *final* form of truth, though he would have agreed with Wordsworth that such an interpretation may contain much more truth than a mechanical view which denies any 'active principle' and would convert Nature into 'a universe of death.'

This brings me to a second point of likeness. Wordsworth's belief in imagination opened his eyes to the significance of mythological religions. The rationalistic movement of the time, agreeing with orthodox Christianity that these religions were untrue, tended to regard them contemptuously as mere superstitious fancies, so far as they were not deliberate inventions of priestcraft. This point of view could no more satisfy Wordsworth than the mechanical theory of Nature. What imagination produces cannot, he doubtless felt, be simply false. In the Fourth Book of the *Excursion* he describes with much sympathy and beauty, and in a manner unlike that of previous poets, the mythological ideas of the ancient Persians and Chaldees and Greeks. Instead of being mere fancies



they were to him proofs that man is never without some witness of the divine spirit in the world—imperfect witnesses, cloudy symbols, but still symbols of a truth that their prosaic critics never saw at all. Well, Schelling was early fascinated by mythology. In his later years, when the philosophy which had made him famous no longer satisfied him, he wrote chiefly of mythologies and mysteries, in which he thought that he detected a profound theosophy. Hegel, who with all his imagination was a logician through and through, had no tendency that way; but he was the first great philosopher who systematically expounded the religions of the world as a series of partial revelations, of which Christianity was the consummation and not the mere denial. He would have been delighted with the Fourth Book of the *Excursion*, which is indeed curiously like him throughout. Naturally he had no more idea of worshipping the Gods of Greece than Wordsworth had, but I am sure he thought there was more truth in them than in the abstract Supreme Being of deistic enlightenment.

If we look now in another direction—the political—we still find this community. In the great year 1789 Wordsworth and Hegel were youths of nineteen. They sympathised enthusiastically with the French Revolution in its earlier stages. The first great sorrow of Wordsworth's life was caused by the war between his country and the French Republic. Nor did they ever regret their enthusiasm or speak unworthily of the hopes that were shaken by the Reign of Terror and destroyed by the rise of Napoleon. The lines beginning,

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven.

are too famous for quotation; but we are at once reminded of them when we read in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, 'This was a glorious sunrise. All thinking beings combined to celebrate it. A sublime emotion

ruled in that time; an enthusiasm of the spirit thrilled through the world, as if its reconciliation with God was now first accomplished.' But the poet and the philosopher who welcomed the Revolution were alike averse to revolutionary *theory*, at least in its tendency to ascribe absolute rights to the individual man in isolation from his organic relationships to others. Wordsworth, in the time of his disappointed hopes, had tried to buoy himself up on the doctrines of Godwin, which show this tendency in an extreme form, attacking all kinds of permanent association, and asserting the sole sovereignty of individual reason at any and every moment. At this time the springs of poetry ran almost dry in him. When they flowed again he turned from such doctrines with abhorrence. In the *Borderers*—a tragedy highly interesting if only for that reason, but little read—he portrayed their practical outcome, as he conceived it and indeed had witnessed it in France. He became the champion of all that Godwin had denounced. In a hundred peaceful poems he celebrated the beauty and sanctity of local attachments and the bonds and affections of the family. During the war with Napoleon he passionately insisted, in his great series of sonnets, that the nation is the one guarantee of outward freedom, and the one home of that inward freedom of soul which alone makes outward freedom durable and valuable. And, carried beyond bounds by the news of the final victory of national independence at Waterloo, he horrified Shelley by declaring that Carnage is God's daughter.<sup>1</sup>

In these matters the philosopher may almost be said to theorise the feelings and intuitions of the poet. His earliest writings show a marked predilection for the social and political morality of the Greeks; and with this

1. The passage was altered later. It seems probable that Wordsworth's feeling about domestic and national relationships is connected with his devotion to Nature. The family is founded primarily on kinship of blood. A nation means, primarily, the inhabitants of a certain tract of Nature. The mere individual of revolutionary theory with his abstract reason would sever himself from these natural attachments.

morality he contrasts unfavourably that of Christendom, especially before the Reformation, on the ground that it is not social and political enough, but makes the individual soul the centre. His mature theory attempts to reconcile these two points of view; but he remained inflexibly opposed to individualistic views, and if you look in his system for what we usually call moral philosophy you find in its place a philosophy of the family, society, and the State. If a man, he seems to tell us, can do his whole duty by these, his conscience should be at peace; and if it troubles him further (except indeed to drive him into religion) it is probably a disguised form of self-conceit or hypocrisy. Hegel, again, like Wordsworth, refused to admit that war is simply irrational and barbarous, and his language on the subject, though far from hyperbolic, has given much offence. Finally, though they both believed in progress, they turned with impatience from ideals which inhabit only some distant future, fail to prove their power here and now in the world, and tempt to mispraisal of realized or realizable good. This attitude was not due merely to that 'loss of courage' to which Wordsworth confessed, and which disinclined them to welcome new social or political movements.<sup>1</sup> It came also from a conviction that there is a 'soul of goodness' in things which are, and that, in spite of evils, the 'inward frame of things' is wiser than its critics.

This conviction may be called optimistic; and so we come to the last similarity between these writers that we can notice. The word 'optimism' is sometimes popularly used to signify merely a sanguine view of anything, or again a theory which shuts its eyes to the evil

1. This phrase, as applied to Wordsworth in his later years, is too weak; but it would be most unjust to say of Hegel what might be said of Wordsworth. He had never held the ideas which first bewitched and then revolted the young poet, and there is nothing of extravagance or terror in his hostility to what may roughly be called 'liberalism.' I cannot go into this subject: but I may advise anyone interested in it to compare Wordsworth's language about Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill with Hegel's essay on the latter.

in the world. But I mean by it here the belief that, in spite of admitted evils, and even by dint of them, the final meaning of things is good, and the consequent tendency to dwell on the good in them. That Wordsworth and Hegel were, in this sense, optimistic is clear enough; and they were almost bound to be so, since in the view of both the ultimate principle in everything is infinite and perfect mind. The only question, apart from particular traits in their optimism, is whether after all it did not rest, at least to some extent, on a failure to feel keenly enough, or to weigh heavily enough, the admitted facts called evil.

Now with Wordsworth there was, I think, some degree of such failure in regard to one matter,—the conflict and pain in Nature. In our day great prominence—perhaps an exaggerated prominence—is given to this matter: it has been thrust into the foreground by the Darwinian theory. That was not so, of course, in Wordsworth's time. But we need no theory to tell us that spiders eat flies and stoats kill rabbits, and yet Wordsworth almost entirely ignores such facts. A poet doubtless is at liberty to do so, and to confine himself to singing of the beauty and happiness of Nature. But then Wordsworth, unlike most poets, preached a *gospel* of Nature; and, as a preacher, he was bound to face the phenomena that seem to throw doubt on his gospel, and to make us feel that after all they are consistent with it. I do not say that he could not have done this; but he did not attempt it, and when he did not ignore the facts in question he showed an inclination to flinch from them.<sup>1</sup> He was here, it seems likely, still somewhat under the influence of Rousseau, which elsewhere he had shaken off. Just as Burns, in his address *To a Field-mouse*, regrets that

Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union;

1. See, for example, *The Redbreast and the Butterfly*.

just as Cowper declares that

God made the country, and man made the town;

so Wordsworth yields here and there too much to a tendency to contrast the happiness, innocence, and harmony of Nature with the unrest, misery, and sin of man.

Some trace of a similar weakness may possibly appear again in his preference of country people to dwellers in towns. But I know no other sign of it in his view of human life. His recognition of the pain and evil there is full enough. He was himself, on the whole, a happy man; and, besides, he believed in joy, and much of his poetry sings of the pleasure that is

spread through the earth  
In stray gifts to be claimed by whoever shall find.

Yet how many of his most famous narratives deal with sad or painful subjects; even (as in *Ruth*, or the *White Doe of Rylstone*, or the story of Margaret in the *Excursion*) with subjects that are terribly sad or painful! The whole of the *Excursion* indeed may be said to be concerned with the question why the Solitary, whose life has been shattered by misfortune, should not allow himself to yield to melancholy or sink into apathy. The reason why these poems themselves have an effect the very reverse of depressing is not that Wordsworth softens or veils the facts; he portrays them minutely and unsparingly. It is that he makes the reader feel the beauty or greatness of soul that may be shown in suffering and evoked by it. Man's life is dark, these poems seem to say, but in his 'celestial spirit' there is a power—that freedom which is one with the 'active principle' or 'freedom of the universe'—that can win glory out of agony and even out of sin, as the full moon, rising behind a grove of trees, burns like a fire in their obscuring foliage, and

turns the dusky veil  
Into a substance glorious as her own.

We encounter here again that sense of the mind's greatness which we found to characterise Wordsworth's Age. And for Wordsworth this greatness is shown not only in that transmuting energy, but in the refusal of the mind to rest in any attainment it may reach, in its pursuit of 'something evermore about to be,' and in strange intimations that it belongs to a vaster world than that of its earthly experience. But the transforming energy implies obstacles, and the overcoming of limits implies limits. And obstacles and limits are evils. So that in this sense we may say that Wordsworth's optimism rests not on the ignoring of evil but on the fact of evil itself.

These last sentences may fairly be accused of giving to the poet's thoughts a more philosophical shape than he himself gave to them or perhaps would have accepted for them. The difficulty with Hegel is of the opposite kind,—how to go beyond statements so general as to be useless, without making statements which he would have repudiated as mere 'popular chatter.' His optimism is on the one hand even more thorough-going than Wordsworth's; and on the other it recognises even more fully the fact of evil. He neither appeals, like the poet, to a future life, nor shares his indisposition to face the struggle and pain in Nature. Everything finite, for him, whether it be natural or human, is more or less deeply touched with imperfection and with conflict; when it feels, with pain; when it is also rational, with sorrow and moral evil. This is so, must be so, and in a sense ought to be so. Undisciplined feelings and hasty thoughts may cry out against it, but reason finds it rational. Hegel's emphasis on this aspect of the world is strong enough to satisfy anyone but a theoretical pessimist. It offends some readers by its apparent ruthlessness, and others by its apparent immorality. But

it is interwoven inseparably with his view of morality; and this is the point where his likeness to Wordsworth is most obvious. He frequently attacks the doctrine, a favourite with many writers of the *Aufklärung*, that man is born good or is good by nature. That, he replies in effect, neither is, nor possibly could be, true. Man is not, indeed, by nature evil in the full sense of that word; but he is not by nature what he should be, and in that sense he *is* evil. He has to become good; and he can become good only by making himself so. For goodness is free activity, acts of will issuing in outward deeds; and though you can give a man a thing, to talk of an act being given to him, by Nature or anything else, is to talk pure nonsense. Nor can he make himself good except by organising his nature, which means developing it through limitation and denial; and by facing obstacles and transforming them into instruments of progress; and by the suppression of the moral evil that arises in him. It is there to be suppressed, and for no other reason; and the natural impulses are there to be organised; and the obstacles to be transformed. But, to be suppressed, organised, transformed, a thing must exist. As Goethe said,

He only merits life and freedom  
Who daily conquers them anew.

Life and freedom, Hegel would add, are not merely *merited* by conquest, they *are* conquest; and conquest implies a foe. Without evils, then, no moral goodness.

This idea expresses theoretically, we may say, the spirit of some of Wordsworth's greatest poetry. And Hegel pushes it much further. Obstacles and other evils are forms of negation; goodness, which is freedom realising itself, is the negation of them. But negation, and the negation of it, are not the essence of morality alone; they are the secret of the whole world, 'the very pulse of the machine.' Negation or contradiction is not, of

course, everywhere pain or moral evil, but everywhere in the world it exists. The conflict and the transitoriness of all natural beings (and man is partly natural) proceed from it, and without it there would be no world at all. The world—nature and finite mind—is what it is, the *partial* manifestation of God, because there is this negation in it; and its whole life, viewed from this side, is a groaning and travailing to return to him or be 'reconciled' with him. It does return, and returns completely in the spirit of man, but there only through the deepest of all conflicts and negations, man's total denial of his finite being, and his total self-surrender to God, in whom there is no negation that is not overcome. This surrender is also identification. Here the mind (there is but one) puts off its finitude; its implicit infinity is realised, its temporal life exchanged for eternity, and its mere humanity for divinity. And as this is accomplished only through negation, we may say that negation, though in God it is all overcome, is necessary even to God.<sup>1</sup> We have here assuredly a doctrine of the greatness of the mind, and no less certainly an optimistic doctrine, but not an optimism which arises from the ignoring of evil or of the weakness, sorrow, or sin of man.

I have but scratched the surface of my subject. I had intended at least to illustrate it further from the affinities between Schopenhauer and Byron. But the limits of a lecture are already reached, and only a few words can be added. It will be recognised perhaps that, so far as Wordsworth and Hegel are concerned, that exalted sense of human possibilities which marks their time was less presumptuous than it appears at first; since in their view the mind of man is no property of his, and indeed,

1. According to Hegel this truth, with the truth of the unity of God and man, is contained in Christianity, which says in one language what his philosophy says in another; while Deism, with its merely positive Supreme Being, misses these truths.



we might say, his private share in it consists of its limitations, while its greatness is all derived. But, even so, it may be asked whether they did not over-estimate that greatness, and whether later generations, and our own, have not tended to moderate or even to reverse their judgments, and generally to regard with some disfavour the impassioned enthusiasm, ambition, and melancholy of their Age. On the whole, I presume, that is so; nor, in trying to exhibit some of their ideas, have I implied any unqualified acceptance of them. And yet, if I may descend to personal opinions, I believe in that Age. Every time, no doubt, has the defects of its qualities; but those periods in which, and those men in whom, the mind is strongly felt to be great, see more and see deeper, I believe, than others. Their time was such a period, and ours is not. And when the greatness of the mind is strongly felt, it *is* great and works wonders. Their time did so, and ours does not. How should it? From causes totally unknown to us, it seems that after about 1840 for many years scarcely any men of the highest genius, if any, were born in this country or elsewhere on the earth.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps that is one reason why some of us now doubt the greatness of the mind, and others take middling minds for great. We have the past to judge by, but most of us judge by the present. If men like those of 1770 were born twenty years ago, or ten, or even last month, some of us will live to see their wonderful works; and then, in our own language, we shall speak of the mind more as the men of 1770 spoke.

1. Numbers, possibly, may have been born who have disappeared prematurely. So they may in 1770. I need hardly add that I do not suppose the lack of genius of the first rank to be the *only* cause of the deficiency in great works; but I do not believe that unfavourable influences are more than a secondary cause.









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